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Close Reading through Colour

Fiona McLachlan



*'Hushed Tonalities' colour strategy. Visualisation based on the work of Reich and Hall Architects
Hand painted collage, F. McLachlan and M. Wenger-Di Gabriele (2014) (Photo: Urs Sigenthaler)*

i.

It is 25 years since emerging architects in Edinburgh and Dublin were linked through the 'Tales from Two Cities' exhibition.¹ This was also the first time my practice had been asked to reflect on the role of colour in our work. Under the acute gaze of its curator, Shane O'Toole, we were asked to dissect colour and form in our developing work. Line drawings and black and white photographs explored formal elements used to re-configure rooms within rooms. The elements of colour suggested differentiation to reinforce a particular reading, or deliberate misreading, of the form. Colour had always been strongly present in our work, and even at this early stage in the practice development, there was an awareness of tacit principles at play. A hot pink drinks' cabinet implied warmth where a hearth had once been, painted surfaces were divided by sharp boundaries in hue

¹ Tales from Two Cities, (1994) Dublin: Gandon Editions / Edinburgh: Matthew Architecture Gallery

to delineate shifts in geometry. Through this enforced separation of form and colour, multiple readings of the architecture were revealed.

The potential of colour to undermine architectural form may explain some of the common wariness amongst architects in their use of colour. John Ruskin commented ‘...*the artist who sacrifices or forgets a truth of form in the pursuit of a truth of colour, sacrifices what is definite to what is uncertain, and what is essential to what is accidental*’.² Although his observation was directed at painting, this sense of unease in the agency of colour can equally be applied in the sphere of architecture.

Colour is ethereal, dynamic and not entirely predictable, its perception is relative to cultural, social and physical context, and wholly contingent on the light source that generates our sensory perception. In my experience working with colour, this ambiguity, these multiple readings, should be understood as the starting point for design. If the experience of architecture is firmly back in contemporary architectural discourse, as intimated by Harry Francis Mallgrave in ‘*from Object to Experience*’, for example, then colour must surely play a part in this developing language.³

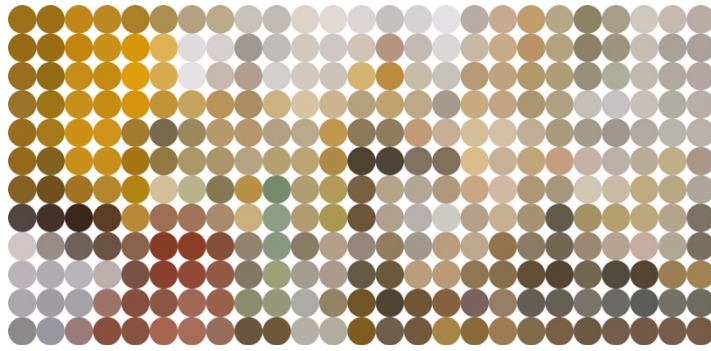
Colour has been a constant theme of my own involvement in architectural practice. It has also become a focus of sustained academic research and, more recently, of teaching. Initial study revealed that the teaching of colour in architectural education has generally slipped out of sight in our curricula. This may also account for some evident nervousness in those who practice. There are enough examples of colour being poorly used in architecture, splashed around like cheap aftershave to disguise inadequate design, budget or thought, to suggest that a level of caution is warranted. My aim in both research and teaching is therefore to promote a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the potential this complex phenomenon, to allow architectural designers to be able to employ it with greater confidence.

ii.

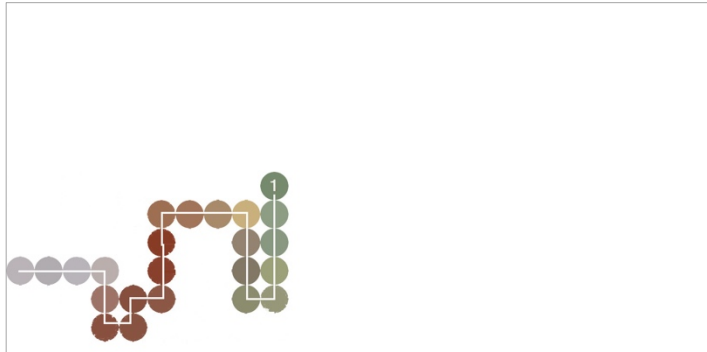
Fourth year students at the University of Edinburgh, where I teach architectural design studio and professional practice, can now take a semester-long course *On Colour: in Architecture*. After initial, intensive workshops, each student defines their own line of enquiry. One student, for example, considered the way in which the eye moves across a painting, roving from colour to colour, form and tone, figure and ground. By pixelating the studied image into small circles, she proposed a way of seeing the space of the painting as a dynamic experience. Applied to analyse architecture, this pixelated technique attempted to reveal how we might experience colour while moving through a space. A further project focussed on cultural meaning and associations. Reflecting on the student’s Highland home, the study considered the frequent inclusion of colour in Gaelic place names. Asking fellow Gaelic speakers to paint the colour they associated with particular words, the participants drew on specific memories of place, people, smells, music and light. In each case, the projects demonstrated aspects of our colour consciousness. The range of projects is broad and the process, expansive as they unravel a particular thread of investigation through experimentation and informed by reading.

² John Ruskin, (1843) ‘Modern Painters Volume I: of general principles and of truth’ p71

³ Mallgrave, Harry Francis (2018) ‘From Object to Experience’, London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts



Mosaic interpretations of John Bratby's, Interior with fireplace and window at Greenwich (1957) (Jessica Thomson, 2017)



iii.

A co-authored book, *Colour Strategies in Architecture*, is the product of research collaboration between myself and the Haus der Farbe in Zurich.⁴ The project originated from a chance meeting at a conference, and developed through a discursive and interdisciplinary process of enquiry. The Haus der Farbe's art historians and colour designer had established a way of observing, documenting and replicating the colour palettes used as part of commissioned consultancy work for various Swiss cantons. An earlier publication- *Farbraum Stadt: Box ZRH* was published together with the Swedish Natural Colour System (NCS). Included in the box are a set of postcards, each one depicting the palette of a building. The researchers' method is to observe by eye, record meticulously, and then replicate large samples by hand painting in order to observe the colours isolated from their architectural context. Another aspect of their work involves site-specific studies of surface colours used in basecourse, render, woodwork and roof that anchor the colour portraits in the colours of the locality. Despite my initial reservations that this might result in heritage-led restrictions dictating or adversely limiting the colours of new buildings, the Haus der Farbe's work has provided local councils with a broadly-based conceptual approach to colour design. The palettes may subtly tweak the saturation, tone and hue of colours to reinforce a local identity and character through new buildings.

In the *Colour Strategies in Architecture* project, we sought to develop the research to consider colour in architectural design. We selected built works from three cities-Edinburgh, Zurich and Berlin- from the 1920s to the present day, through the work of six architectural practices. The challenge was to take the researchers' expertise and extend it to the study of a three-dimensional experience of colour. The research methodology had therefore to be tuned beyond a study of surface colour to investigate how the selected architects might have used colour within their design practice, and more significantly, how we might communicate the integration of colour into architecture as part of a conceptual design process. The research was slow and meticulous, taking three years to observe, research and document the colours used in the chosen buildings using hand-mixed and hand-painted panels. After 354 large swatches had been made, the research team

⁴ F. McLachlan, A. Naser, L. Sibillano, S. Wettstein, M. Wenger-Di Gabrielle, , 'Colour Strategies in Architecture' Jun 2015 Basel: Schwabe

used them as a means through which to analyse the way in which the colour had been used in each of the buildings. The strategies gradually emerged and were delineated through this process of detailed observation and intersubjective discussion.



Research team members discuss findings of initial colour documentation (Photo: Stefanie Wettstein, 2013)

Reflecting back on the project, I would suggest that our method has similarities with close reading. In literature, close reading goes beyond the text to pay attention to the structure, language, expression and at a finer grain, word choice and syntax.⁵ The aim is to discover layers of meaning, to consider ambiguities and, crucially in relation this analogy, to interpret meaning. Even where the architects are still alive and available for discussion, they do not necessarily comprehend, (or indeed seek to know) their reasoning behind certain decisions on colour. Much of what we do as architects is intuitive in relation to colour design. The aim of the colour strategies book is to reveal a way of seeing, a way of reading the architecture through the colour. Our intention was not to suggest a didactic approach, but rather to construct an understanding of the strategic use of colour, integrated with the architectonic principles, for each building.

For example, the two contemporary practices in the book operate very different strategies in relation to their approach to colour. The Swiss practice of Knapkiewicz and Fickert have used colour as a mask, applied as a surface layer to subvert form, distort scale or to imply volumes that may not follow the physical form. Theirs is a playful, illusionary technique, which we interpreted as 'Second Layer'. Their colour palette is unconventional and edgy, yet seen in the context of painted facades in Zurich, it can also be seen as a re-invention of a tradition. It undermines formal expression and is not entirely veracious, which may be troubling to those raised on a modernist sensibility. The practice's colour use is deliberate and knowing, and supports a particular way of reading the architecture.

⁵ Brown, s & Kappers, L (2012), Implementing the Common Core State Standards: A Primer on 'close reading text', Washinton DC The Aspen Institute, p2



Rigiplatz Housing, Zurich, (2010) Knapkiewicz + Fickert, (Photo: F. McLachlan)

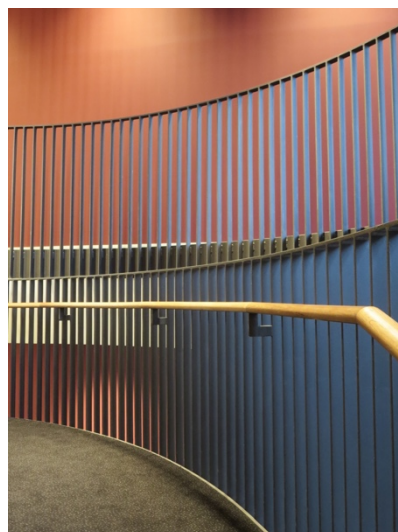
By contrast, Edinburgh architects, Reiach and Hall, have clear principles but avoid an overt display of colour in the conventional sense. Two buildings were suggested by the practice because they exemplified the importance of light and shadow in their work, and in particular the low northern light of Scotland, with conscious reference to Peter Davidson's 'Idea of North'.⁶ Their work suggested a subtle, predominantly material-based palette with tonal shifts. Our interpretation was that there was still a clear and very consistent colour strategy at work, even one that was not declared by the practice. The title 'Hushed Tonalities' suggests that there is a calculated process of subduing hue in favour of a modulation in tone. The architecture stands quietly in the background, yet is never mute.

⁶ Peter Davidson (2004) 'The Idea of North', London: Reaktion Books



*Colour Portrait: Forth Valley College, Reiach and Hall Architects
Hand painted collage F. McLachlan and M. Wenger-Di Gabriele (2014) Photo: Urs Sigenthaler*

The earliest projects the research team considered were by the Swiss architect, Lux Guyer. Her residential work from the late 1920s is unusually polychromatic. The colour is applied in a painterly manner, building relationships between figure and ground, adopting adjacencies and a dynamic composition. It invites motion, causing the eye's saccadic movements to jump between the depth and the peripheral edges of each space. In a recent collaboration with LDN Architects, I acted as colour consultant for the major renovation of the north side of Old College, part of the University of Edinburgh. Sections of the building are by Robert Adam, extended and completed by William Playfair in the early 19th century. The massive stone block, which appears monolithic, was originally constructed as a terrace with crosswalls. The project punched a series of doorways through the full length of the block, opening up an extraordinary and dramatic new vista at first floor level. The colour design made reference to the 'Painterly Promenade' colour strategy that the *Colour Strategies* research had identified in the work of Lux Guyer. Experienced on the move, in foreground and background, the teaching rooms are differentiated by subtle tonal shifts within a series of hues. The building was completed in January this year and is now fully occupied as the Edinburgh University Law School.



*Application of 'Painterly Promenade' colour strategy
University of Edinburgh Law School renovation, LDN Architects with Fiona McLachlan, (2019)*

(Photos: F. McLachlan)

iv.

Like any close reading of text therefore, our reading of the colour strategies within the examples studied are interpretations to augment learning. We misunderstand that the ethereal nature of colour and the limitations of language play a part as we struggle to define our experiences. Colour codification systems and terms often serve to further conflate and confuse. Myths and dogmas prevail. Much of the pleasure of colour is in its ambiguity and complexity as a metaphysical experience, neither controllable nor constant. Much of the disappointment of poor colour design is in its lack of nuanced understanding.

During a discussion with O'Donnell and Tuomey some years ago, they noted that what concerned them, was less which colour to use, but rather an instinctive sense of when something should have colour. The actual hue, as artists will readily confirm, is frequently less significant than the tone. The strategies studied in the book are offered as ways of seeing, and also ways of integrating colour within the process of architectural design beyond the simplistic choice of one hue over another. This goes further than colour as a decorative surface treatment, it invites architects to consider a holistic approach to include colour in their conscious thinking at all stages of design.